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# **Between Real and Realistic**

*Second loose assemblage of chapter drafts*

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# Introduction

I don't recall the first game I ever played, but I'll never forget the many games that drew me into captivating worlds. I also remember the many moments I felt scared, running from one light spot to the other in the dark streets of Bright Falls in *Alan Wake* (2010), diving through underwater caves on Rook Islands scared to be attacked by a shark in *Far Cry 3* (2012), and jamming a massive needle into my ocular cavity to access the NoonTech Diagnostic Machine for life-saving information as Isaac in *Dead Space* (2008). Despite the fact that the graphical performance of these games is no longer on par with that of contemporary productions, they nevertheless appeared highly realistic at the time of their release.

*»Videogames are perhaps the most significant development in the modern popular arts, and they provide a fertile field of study for philosophers of the arts (and philosophers more generally).«* (Robson, Grant, 2018)

Video games are a mass medium that is increasingly used as a platform for social and political discourse. The representation of labour and trade unions in games not only reflects historical and contemporary conflicts, but also provides a framework to address system criticism, solidarity and collective action.

Since Role-playing Games (RPG) are becoming more realistic, trying to imitate reality not only by its graphics but also by its in-game narratives and (historical) game spaces, the game is becoming an immersive experience, blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction.

No matter if you're riding as Arthur Morgan and the infamous Van der Linde gang across America at the dawn of the modern age in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2), rescuing the mysterious imprisoned girl Elizabeth as the U.S. Cavalry veteran Booker DeWitt in *Bioshock Infinite* or defeat revival gangs to bring freedom to the oppressed masses during The Industrial Revolution in London 1868 as Jacob Frye in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, players are travelling from the physical reality into the virtual universe of the game through the screen.

The thesis deals with the analysis of the representation of trade unions and labour movements in video games of AAA publishers. This includes the examination of narrative threads, game mechanics and aesthetic elements that focus on labour struggles and collective organisations in games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. It also addresses the issue of trade unionism in the game industry itself, particularly in relation to the working conditions of developers.

While non-player characters (NPC) are programmed with little autonomy working in endless loops to support the realism of the gamespace, artists, engineers, programmers and designers face periods of unpaid overtime to speed up lagging video game productions – called »Crunch«. The real and realistic crunch of NPC and video game developers can be observed as separate topics, yet similarities appear between those two – artists, engineers, programmers and designers crunching to finish games that tell stories of exploited workers.

The research builds on existing work in games studies, social theory and art studies that examine video games as a medium of social reflection as well as on previous work on collective movements and their representation in digital media and extends the discourse to consider how labour and trade unions are visually and narratively represented in games. At the same time, by

looking at current working conditions (e.g. crunch culture) in the games industry itself, an additional, practice-relevant dimension is introduced into the work.

*»There is a lot of history in the game industry as rooted in nerds in garages and doing it for the love of it. That has just filtered down into places expecting employees to just go above and beyond without question, all the time.» (Cote, Harris, 2021)*

How does the visual and narrative design of games affect the perception of social realities and to what extent can these representations stimulate reflection on labour, trade unions and historical events? Who has the agency for the visual and narrative concepts? What happens when the lines between real and realistic blur?

The thesis is divided into three main chapters, which focus on theoretical research, game analysis and current game developments.

The first chapter is approaching the topic from a wide angle, exploring how labour and trade unions are represented in media and pop culture and how these inform video games but also how video games as a medium are re-used aesthetically. A critical perspective on the socio-political potential of video games in fostering awareness of labour movements will be drawn by diving into key concepts from social and game theory.

Explicit insights into the representation can be gained from a selection of relevant games that deal with trade unions and labour disputes. The investigation of the narrative and mechanical implementation of trade union themes in these games as well as the analysis of the visual aesthetics and design of these games in relation to the labour movement are part of the second part of the thesis. The qualitative focus will be on a selection of games that provide exemplary insights into different narratives and game spaces, discussing how games as a medium reflect social realities and which narrative and aesthetic decisions lead to a critical examination of labour disputes.

Investigating the real-world working conditions within the game industry, the third chapter focuses on crunch culture and recent trade union movements. Parallels will be drawn between the thematic content of video games and the realities of their production. The question of agency will be proposed, asking who writes the stories and makes the primary choices? Who is joining the trade unions and what are the prospects of it?

In the last part the findings will be summarised, reflecting on the broader implications of video games as cultural artifacts, questioning how these representations shape player's understanding of historical and contemporary labour struggles.

# Chapter 01: Real

## Non-playable Creators

A few years ago, a trend developed on social media platforms in which video game aesthetics and the movements of NPCs are imitated. Nicole Szymkowski and Oskar Hoff, for example, have been performing as NPCs on their joint account @loczniki since 2021. Coming from a dance background, they copy the specific movement patterns of video game characters such as those from the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011) or The Sims. A comparable example are the brothers Orlando Murayire, Fernando Shami, Freddy Sheja and Aristide Shema from @\_dem.bruddaz\_, who recreate GTA scenarios from a 3rd person perspective and meme the mechanical-looking movements and bugs in particular. In her "Let's do my makeup npc style" videos, TikTok creator Nyane Lebajoa (@nyane) presents herself as a styleable character that some of her fans in the comments section even wish they could dress and apply makeup to in an actual video game.



Screenshot left: repost by @controller of @dem\_bruddaz\_/tiktok | Screenshot right: TikTok @nyane My Sims Cozy Bundle

Der Trend, dass TikTok Creator NPCs nachahmen, führte 2022 durch die japanische TikTokerin @nauteccoco zum ›npc live stream‹ Trend, in dem sie Zuschauenden live als Videospielfiguren verkleidet die Möglichkeit gaben gegen Bezahlung virtuelle Geschenke zu schicken, die als Emojis auf dem Bildschirm erschienen. Sobald ein Emoji erscheint, wird der jeweils "vorprogrammierte" Satz gesagt oder die Geste performt, wobei die Creator oftmals zwischen einer kleinen Auswahl zirkulieren.

Eine der bekanntesten ist Fedha Sinon (@pinkydollreal), die inspiriert von GTA Nebencharakteren ist. Ihre Streamer können Eiscrème Emojis kaufen, worauf sie mit »Ice cream so good« oder auf einen Cowboy Hut mit »Yeehaw, yes« reagiert. Die Emojis sind schon für \$1-\$2 erhältlich und bringen ihr einen Umsatz von \$2,000 - \$3,000 pro Livestream.

*»NPCs are not only culturally and choreographically processed in the form of TikTok trends; they also inspire major series productions, are thematised in comics and YouTube films and are used and appropriated as a social metaphor in various contexts of everyday culture.«*  
(Klengel, Müller, 2024)

## Game Studies and Social Theory

In the 1990s, the field of game studies emerged, underscoring the necessity to examine video games from a theoretical vantage point. In the present era, the industry has expanded considerably, encompassing a vast array of entertainment products that are consumed by millions. They occupy a unique position within the cultural landscape, making them a crucial area of study for those engaged in popular culture and visual studies (cf. Schubert, 2018).

Games as medium can be defined as software designed for entertainment purposes that presents players with primarily visual information and allows for input during runtime, thereby updating the available information (cf. Birken, 2022).

The pseudo-Marxist media guerrilla Total Refusal, which focuses on artistic interventions and appropriations of mainstream video games, for example, describes the language of the gaming community—including terms such as looting, farming, and grinding—as the process of in-game accumulation in which work-like activity is translated into playful action. Video games represent a pastiche of late capitalism, and one can discern the impact of its unleashed dynamics (cf. Total Refusal, 2022a).

*»Video games are a form of world representation that surpasses the imageries of ours. In this world a mass-media consensus corresponds with the current social and moral concepts of our society. Video game culture represents society's understanding of labor, transforms it into gameplay and thereby legitimizes it on an ideological level«* (Total Refusal, 2022a).

## Blurred Boundaries

The term »ludic« is derived from the Latin word »ludus«, meaning »game« or »play«, and was proposed by Johan Huizinga in his 1950 concept »Homo Ludens«. Play is defined as »a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ›different‹ from ›ordinary life‹« (pp. 28).

## Chapter 02 — Realistic

Contemporary Video games and games as a medium in general go beyond entertainment. Rather, games and gaming have become anchored in most fields of our society and are increasingly used as a platform for social and political discourse.

*»They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. As part of the ongoing process of understanding this medium and pushing it further as players, developers, and critics, we must strive to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form.« (Bogost, 2007, pp. 1)*

Since Role-playing Games (RPG) are becoming more realistic, trying to imitate reality not only by its graphics but also by its in-game narratives and (historical) game spaces, the game is becoming an immersive experience, blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction.

No matter if you're riding as Arthur Morgan and the infamous Van der Linde gang across America at the dawn of the modern age in Red Dead Redemption 2, rescuing the mysterious imprisoned girl Elizabeth as the U.S. Cavalry veteran Booker DeWitt in Bioshock Infinite or defeat revival gangs to bring freedom to the oppressed masses during The Industrial Revolution in London 1868 as Jacob Frye in Assassin's Creed Syndicate, players are travelling from the physical reality into the virtual universe of the game through the screen.

To gain an understanding of how these Role-playing Games are constructed, Red Dead Redemption 2, Assassin's Creed Syndicate and Bioshock Infinite will be examined based on their narrative threads, game mechanics and aesthetic elements that focus on labour struggles and collective organisations. The aim is to observe if the narratives engage with historical labour struggles and in what ways the game mechanics and player interactions reinforce or challenge representations of collective movements. The aesthetic choices (i.e. character design, environmental storytelling) are analysed on how they reflect or distort historical realities of labour movements and how NPCs embody the tension between realism and fictionalised exploitation in games. What limitations do these games exhibit in addressing the complexities of historical labour struggles and what are notable examples of games that use educational elements to inform or immerse players in complex topics?

The primary focus lies on the AAA (Triple-A) video game industry and their Role-playing Game productions. Companies like Rockstar Games, Ubisoft or Electronic Arts are predominant game publishers due to their high marketing budgets and elaborate development, which makes them an ideological foundation of the video game industry. By playing the games myself, a different mode of gaming can be conducted. Displayed as side stories to the main plot or sometimes just by actively interacting with or through observing non-player characters (NPCs), the photography mode and screen recordings of the game helps to examine specific scenes and spaces. Thereby the perspective shifts from a player to an observer.

Each game will be analysed by its narrative, visuals, and ludic elements in relation to its depiction of labour and trade unions. This also touches the topics of race and class. By precisely examining game elements as they are represented and how they work, allows to contextualise labour and trade unions as well as their historic backgrounds.

*»When graphic fidelity is increased in video games and the narrative calls attention to the players' actions, morality will likely become much more salient.« (Rogers, 2016)*

## **Narrativity, Visuality and Ludic Elements**

Narrative elements are defined here as the aspects that contextualise the actions in the game world in addition to the dramaturgy of the gameplay. The overarching plot, character development, dialogues, game texts and the environmental narrative, which unfolds through active interaction and exploration, are examined. The narrative provides a framework for games and serves as the basis for immersion in the game world. This connects players with the fictional game world and puts their experiences into a comprehensible context. Narrative authenticity and depth shows how faithfully historical events, movements and ideologies are portrayed and whether they offer nuanced perspectives.

Visuality focuses on aesthetic components that determine the graphical style of the game. The character design, the environment or game world, lighting, animations and the design of the user interface all make statements about conscious design decisions. As Stefan Schubert (2018) argues in »Dystopia in the Skies: Negotiating Justice and Morality on Screen in the Video Game BioShock Infinite«, it is »via its (often optional) visual aspects, the way it presents [itself] to players« (pp. 1). Role-playing games in particular and the increasingly sophisticated 3D graphics emphasise the creation of captivating atmospheres. When analysing the depiction of industrial action and examining the historical accuracy of these game worlds, visual elements provide insight into how carefully environments are recreated. The extent to which graphical fidelity and design decisions immerse players in the game world and contribute to an understanding of complex social dynamics shows how consciously authenticity is used or whether this leads to distortion of context.

The game mechanics and interactive functions of a game are understood here as ludic elements and include the rules, objectives, rewards, challenges and game interactions that determine the gaming experience. Combat mechanisms, resource management and decision-making systems also belong to this category. The range of possible actions and functions contributes to the complexity of a game and influences the player's self-sufficiency, thereby also influencing the perception of the moral significance of one's own actions by allowing a conscious decision to be made in favour of or against something. The interaction of the player's decisions and the representation of labour and labour movements can either reinforce historical authenticity or reduce this complexity to simplified tasks or moral dichotomies.

By analysing the narrative, visual and ludic elements, the potential of video games as a means of education, critical reflection and social commentary becomes clear, but also potential limitations in dealing with differentiated topics. Understanding this triad helps to critically consider how games balance their roles as entertainment products and cultural artefacts.

# Observing, Analysing, Contextualising

## Red Dead Redemption 2

Red Dead Redemption 2 was released in 2018 by Rockstar Games and is the third part of the Red-Dead series after Red Dead Revolver and Red Dead Redemption. Settled in the open game world in 1899 when the Wild West era of America is about to come to an end, players take on the role of Arthur Morgan. The game starts after a robbery went wrong in the western town of Blackwater forcing the Van der Linde gang, of which Arthur is part, to flee. A journey of robbery and fighting leads to internal conflicts that challenges Arthur's ideals being loyal to the gang that raised him (cf. Rockstar Games, 2018).

Red Dead Redemption 2 has received over 175 Game of the Year awards and more than 250 perfect scores (cf. Steam 2024), with the game particularly impressing with its complexity and richness of detail. Writers from various major magazines such as The Guardian and CNET have labelled it an authoritative development of modern video games.

*»This is a story – a collection of stories, really – about the decline of a way of life, as a small gang of outlaws tries ever harder to outrun the inexorable advance of American modernity, as well as the enemies and lawmen they have antagonised along the way...There can be no doubt that this is a landmark game. It is a new high water-mark for lifelike video game worlds.« (The Guardian, MacDonald, 2018)*

*"Red Dead Redemption 2 has undoubtedly raised the bar for narrative open-world games and will likely have a lasting impact on how they are made in the future. It pushes the envelope of what we understand is possible in a video game. It seems that every time we get something new from Rockstar, things inevitably change." (CNET, Bakalar, 2018)*

After analysing the overarching game world, I will focus on two locations that are visited along the main narrative in the game. I will begin by observing the Central Union Railroad Camp, and then move on to examine the miners in Annesburg.

## The Game Space



Screenshot of the map

The vastness of the map already gives a first impression of the size of the game world and the seemingly endless possibilities.

In »Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games« Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel (2019), Aarseth talks about *ludoforming*, explaining how »contemporary, historical or fictional landscape [is turned] into gameworlds« (pp. 127). As one example of his analysis he describes the ludo-compression in Red Dead Redemption 2 and the mismatch of large-scale open game worlds. Based on the American Southwest which in reality stretches over thousands of miles, the map can be crossed within minutes instead of days or weeks.

## Game Interface

During the first chapter, players are given a comprehensive introduction to the controls and learn the various button combinations step by step. For example, players learn how to ride their horse, but also that they have various response options during conversations. As the game progresses, the Adler Ranch is searched after a shootout and we are asked to look for anything useful or edible. In addition to food, there are also personal items that are not only placed in the room as decorative elements, but can also be examined more closely. The wide range of interaction possibilities is one of the reasons why Red Dead Redemption 2 is celebrated by many game enthusiasts; there is just too much stimulation. When I played the chapter for the first time, I deliberately took my time examining all the drawers, cupboards and objects, and was told several times by my gang members outside to hurry up. In a later mission, where we raided the warehouse of another gang, I wanted to pull the change out of every single person's pocket, not knowing whether I might need the money at a later date. I was also asked to hurry up and finish the mission in order to progress further in the game.





Figure left: Reading the backside of a portrait.

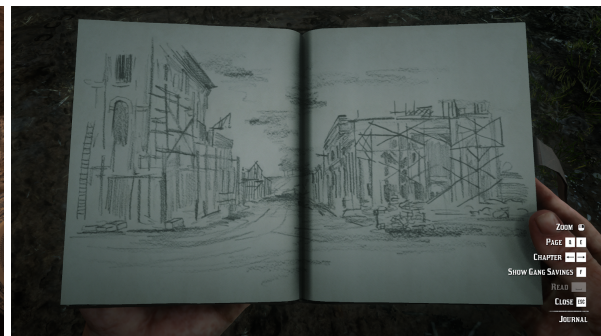


Figure right: Hand drawings of houses in Saint Denise

## Central Union Railroad Camp

Positioned halfway between Van Horn and Annesburg lies the Central Union Railroad Camp. The camp is traversed by the player in three distinct missions, with the location changing as the game progresses and the train line undergoing further expansion. It is important to note that the missions are not a prerequisite for progression through the game. Consequently, it is possible that the initial mission may become inaccessible and unplayable.

Historically, the Central Union Railroad Camp is based on the history of the first transcontinental railroad in the USA which was built between 1863 and 1869.



Screenshot of the position of the Central Union Railroad Camp on the game map and entering the Camp from south-east

As we walk through the camp, we can see two principal areas: The train tracks as places of work and the tents as places of rest. Upon closer observation, it is evident that there is a stark contrast between the white men in leadership roles and the Cantonese workers, who are meticulously laying the train track. These differences are clear not only in activities such as guarding and controlling the workers, but also in clothing and language. The leadership roles are clearly distinguished by their elaborate clothing and boots, as well as their arms. In stark contrast, the cantonese laborers are distinguishable by their simple attire, including  $\frac{3}{4}$  trousers, hats or caps, and shirts dirty from working. In some cases, they even wear sandals.



If we look at the various activities of the NPCs, a few recurring tasks stand out. The guards watch over the labourers and the camp 24/7, changing their position from time to time, but there is never a moment when they rest.



The labourers are either lined up along the resulting train tracks, hammering away at the ground with pickaxes, or resting in the camp. The situations in which they rest are much more elaborate. Sleeping on the beds, sitting together at the table or campfire, squatting at the entrance to the tents or smoking standing up. The more time we spend with them, the more conversations we can overhear, in which people supposedly exchange ideas. In some conversations, we overhear



them discussing the exploitative working conditions, even rising conflicts between the railroad workers and the employers, but these are rather statements then going any further in context.



*Photos of Central Union Railroad workers sleeping.*

## Historical Context

Historically, the Central Union Railroad Camp is based on the first transcontinental railroad in the USA which was built between 1863 and 1869. The game depicts the evolution of railroad tracks over time; however, there is a discrepancy in the timeline, with the events occurring approximately 30 years later. The western part of the transcontinental railroad around Sierra Nevada was laid by 15,000 to 20,000 Chinese migrants. Being paid not even half of the wages as the white workers, 3,000 Chinese workers went on strike in 1867 demanding equal pay, shorter workdays, and better working conditions. This work stoppage was the largest labor action in the country at that time.



Screenshot Red Dead Redemption 2, Central Union Railroad Camp.



Figure xx: Alfred A. Hart Photographs, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries (1862-1869) Workers lay track along the Ten Mile Canyon stretch of the Transcontinental Railroad

The Central Union Railroad Camp is an accurate visual representation, particularly when compared to historical photographs. However, the scenery lacks sufficient detail to make references to actual events. The Cantonese workers are NPCs working in endless loops of hammering or resting in the camp.





## The Miners in Annesburg



*Photos of Red Dead Redemption 2, Annesburg, the train station and the coal loading.*

The mining town Annesburg is positioned in New Hanover on the banks of the Lannahechee River in the region of Roanoke Ridge all the way in the northeast of the map. It was »established by German settlers who discovered the rich coal seams in the surrounding hills. The surrounding countryside and waterways are sooty and polluted from the mining operations which have been running for almost a century.« (Red Dead Redemption 2, 2018)

Compared to the Central Union Railroad Camp, we have a more complex infrastructure, which consists of the mine. The coal is dismantled and shovelled into mine-carts, which are then loaded onto train wagons via conveyor chains and transported away. At first glance, I was fascinated by the complexity of the scene: in addition to the production chain, we can find a train station, a post office, various residential buildings with families and workers, and the interweaving of the buildings stretching across the slope was exciting to explore. On closer inspection, however, the recurring moments and errors in the production chain become clear.

For example, the oncoming train driver waits endlessly for the train track to be cleared by the ever filling goods train. However, the train keeps moving forwards and backwards as soon as one of the wagons is supposedly full. One worker carries long wooden planks from the upper to the

lower store, while another drags them back up from below. Again and again, their paths cross and they get in each other's way. For several minutes I followed a miner who first walked through the town with his broom until he threw it onto a mound of dirt and disappeared again.

When I made it into the mine, which is constantly guarded, I came across 3 miners hammering on the wall in endless loops while two people loaded what they thought was mined coal into wagons. However, as they turned their shovels to drop the coal, they paused and froze in that position for what felt like an eternity. At the front of the mine, I came across a man who constantly looked at the boxes in front of him and then returned to his notebook, while three men in the area above leaned against a pillar or sat on a bench and smoked.



On my second visit to the mine, I expected a similar scenario, but was surprised in the opposite direction. There are significantly more workers in the mine during the day, but this does not necessarily mean that more of them are working. Many of them stand around, smoke, sit on the floor, or walk around. If you get too close to them while observing, they quickly start moving as if you had caught them doing nothing. When I tried to observe a miner shoveling up coal that had already been removed, he remained in a crouched position. We kept glancing at each other, but he seemed to stare for minutes on end.

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